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ABSTRACT

Two key periods in the history of Australian child care policies are examined and speculative comparisons with British policies are made. During World War II, perceptions of the need for organized child care in Australia were tied almost exclusively to the war-related need for women's labor. During 1942, the question of child care for children of women war workers received considerable public attention and opposition. In early 1943, the government reluctantly acceded to the many demands for child care provision by introducing an experimental program in which a small number of philanthropic organizations were to be given funds to expand existing services. On Christmas Eve, 1945, the organizations were informed that the experiment in child care had come to an end. It was not until 1972 that the Australian government once more became involved in child care policy by introducing the Child Care Act. Parallels between the World War II period and the post-1972 period are numerous. In recent years, child care issues have moved from the periphery to the mainstream of the political agenda and there has been a massive expansion of public expenditure on child care provision. These changes have occurred as a result of the large rise in the employment of women with young children and the increased significance of their contribution to household earnings. (RH)

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# The shaping of social policy agendas: Australian child care policy.

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Policies relating to the care of infants and young children constitute one of the principle means by which modern states have regulated the lives of women, both in the public and the private sphere. In this paper I propose to examine 2 key moments in the history of Australian child care policies, World War II and the period from 1972 to the present, a[illegible] to make [illegible]w speculative comparisons with British policies.

Feminist writers in a number of countries have drawn attention to the former period as possessing particular significance with respect to several themes, among them women's workforce participation and the related issues of women's pay and conditions and the sexual segmentation of the workforce; the development of the welfare state and its reinforcement of the sexual division of labour in market and non-market work; and the transformation of cultural definitions of femininity. These themes have been well documented in relation to Britain. Of particular interest, in the present context, is Denise Riley's (1983) highly original study of the relationship between psychology and social policy focussing on child care policies during and after World War II.

In Australia the period has, until recently, been largely unresearched by feminists although highly popular with more orthodox historians, who have scarcely mentioned women other than as members of the armed services or munitions workers, with a tacit acknowledgement that they "kept the home fires burning." The conditions in which either kind of work was done, the relationship between the two, and the role of the state in mediating this relationship, appear to have evoked little scholarly curiosity, perhaps because of the radical

separation in most academic disciplines between "work" and "family life".

In Australia during World War II perceptions of the need for organised care for very young children were tied almost exclusively to the war-related need for women's labour. Some women's organisations argued that the difficulties of domestic labour under war-time conditions necessitated relief from the burdens of child-rearing, and a few feminist voices were even heard to argue that women were entitled to child care assistance for whatever purpose they chose. The latter however, were minor themes, and appear to have played no role in official debates over the question of child care provision. It was entirely consistent with the traditions of Australian political culture that the state was looked to in these circumstances as the source of funding for child care provision. There was, however, considerable conflict over the question of state management and control: child care had hitherto been the province of bourgeois philanthropy, and the propertied and professional classes were reluctant to relinquish their role to state bureaucracies (especially bureaucracies under the direction of a Labor government, as was the case for most of the 1940's). In fact, as we shall see, the state had no desire to assume responsibility for child care provision, either financially or in a managerial capacity.

In the early part of the war the increased demand for labour was met almost entirely through the absorption of large numbers of unemployed men. It was not until after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour at the end of 1941 that the demand for labour increased to such an extent that social definitions of employability began to be reconstructed. In relation to the labour market, women remained an

indifferentiated category only for so long as their participation was totally resisted. Once a need for their labour was admitted, a process of differentiation began. In the early stages of the war, the categorisation was, in the main, limited to marital status: single women could be employed, married women could not. By early 1942, with the anticipation of critical labour shortages, married women were being redefined as employable. The category of "married woman" was further broken down: firstly, according to whether the woman was responsible for the care of children, and secondly according to the age of the children. Opinion was divided as to which of these, if any, were employable. The employment of women with pre-school aged children was contentious, and the employment of women with children under two appears to have been generally regarded as quite unacceptable.

The inclusion of married women in the category of employable persons raised, for the first time in official discourse, considerations of the compatibility of women's "private" and "public" work: what, in effect, could be done to ensure that women's "domestic responsibilities" did not conflict with their economic activity?

During 1942 the question of child care provision for women war workers received considerable public attention. Women's groups, with the support of some sections of the labour movement, organised public meetings in most states of Australia, followed by the formation of committees to lobby federal and state governments for child care provision.

Their efforts, of course, were not entirely unresisted. Defenders of the family, anti-communists, and bureaucratic cost-

benefit analysts offered various forms of opposition. The most persistent and influential source of opposition was the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, which exerted considerable influence within the Australian Labor Party (in government between 1942 and 1949). Archbishop Mannix, of Melbourne, argued that children were better off in a home, any home, than in an "institution", and asked the Federal government for assurances that

> unless a national emergency so demands, neither...creches nor any other means shall be employed which may induce mothers to cast aside their direct responsibilities in the belief that they can serve their country more fittingly by minding a machine than by minding those children whom God has committed to their care. 1

Although anti-communism was a more specifically post-war phenomenon, child care was periodically tarred with the communist brush, with references to children being "drafted" into "communal centres", and child care proposals being described as "a vicious idea propagated by communists".

Within the Federal bureaucracy, the unpaid services performed by women in their homes were weighed against the cost of replacing those services (or at least some of them) if women entered the workforce. As the Minister for Health saw it:

> The whole question [of child care provision] turns upon whether the gain in manpower is justified by the expense and, connected with that, whether there is such need for manpower to justify expenditure at this rate. 2

In spite of the various forms of opposition to married women's employment and to child care provision, it became increasingly clear that many women with small children were entering the workforce. Estimates of the need for child care varied, due both to the difficulty of obtaining reliable statistics and to variations in the

definition of "need" (the definitions used by women's groups were more inclusive than those used by bureaucrats). In all cases, estimates of need greatly exceeded the availability of child care services.

There is evidence that the possibility of child care provision was being canvassed within parts of the Federal bureaucracy from the end of 1941. The main support for the idea came from the Department of Labour and National Service. Within the Department of Health different priorities prevailed, and there was considerably less enthusiasm for the child care proposals (similar bureaucratic divisions apparently manifested themselves in both the United States and in Britain). A crucial role in bringing about government action on child care was played by a number of women recruited to the war-time civil service. All were highly educated, unmarried and without children, and had participated in public life. Only one had any previous involvement with early childhood services, their politics were varied, and only one would have described herself as a feminist. While working within the Federal bureaucracy, they were also involved in the committees lobbying for child care, and had a personal attachment to the issue which was not shared by their male counterparts. Their correspondence indicates that on more than one occasion they were able to utilise their dual involvements to orchestrate events to their desired ends.

In early 1943 the Australian government reluctantly acceded to the many demands for child care provision by introducing an "experimental programme" in which a small number of philanthropic organisations were to be given funds to expand existing services (they were expressly forbidden from using the money to establish <u>new</u> services). The programme was extended several times, but always on a

pro tem basis. The government thereby avoided the establishment of any administrative apparatus which might have implied a continuing commitment in the area. The particular attraction of this solution was, no doubt, that it tapped a resource of "suitable" (ie. voluntary unpaid) female labour at minimal expense to the state, while reinforcing the appropriateness of the existing sexual division of labour. The responsible Cabinet minister was very defensive about the programme, avoiding publicity and assuring critics that it was only providing for children already in need of care and was not encouraging more mothers to enter the workforce and "neglect" their children. The entire expenditure by the Australian government on wartime children's centres amounted to £40,132 (compared with $90m. spent by the U.S. government under the Lanham Act. On Christmas Eve, 1945, the philanthropic organisations were informed that the "experiment" in child care had come to an end. It was not until 1972 that the Australian government was once more to become involved in child care policy.

The outstanding conclusion of this historical study concerns, not so much what did happen, as what did not: the extreme reluctance of those making political decisions to countenance the replacement by the state of women's child-rearing labour or in any way significantly to challenge the domestic economy of the household. The state is shown as an arena of struggle, but what also emerges is the difficulty of attempting to use the state to bring about fundamental change in social organisation.

Looking at the past two decades in Australia, there are some interesting comparisons to be drawn. Once again, a period of intense

political struggle by women "in and around the state" has resulted in child care provision being placed on the political agenda (although I think this time more centrally). Once again, also, it has proven impossible to overcome resistance to the costs associated with relinquishing the assumption that women's labour will be available to the state outside of the operations of the market - that is, free. For the past two decades feminists have struggled, not only to place child care on the political agenda, but to define its provision as a part of the social wage. Once again, the principles of collective provision are being abandoned in favour of "family" responsibility - in the present instance, not by an overt redefinition of women's work and the nature of child care services, but by means of a resort to the language of economic rationalism. Child care funding has been in the process of redefinition along class lines as an income support for low income families. The concept of the "family" is regaining its opacity, and the connections between child care as public policy and the redistribution of resources <u>within</u> families are again slipping from view. Ministers in the Australian Labor government have successfully characterised child care policy as a class issue, blurring its connections with sexual politics. Child care is increasingly defined as "work-related" (meaning market work), and evaluated politically only within this framework and in terms of "efficiency" and "cost-effectiveness". Women, in this discourse, only "work" when they are in the labour market. Increasingly, there is no argument for state support of their non-market activities (although the state is, as ever, active in regulating the relation between the two).

The origins of the Australian government's contemporary involvement in child care policy stem from 1972, when one of the last acts of the conservative government in power since 1949 was to introduce a Child Care Act. The Act was extremely limited in its scope (for instance, setting conditions which precluded access to funded child care for children with two parents in the workforce). In 1969 (the closest date for which comprehensive information is available) there were only 555 child care centres in Australia, the overwhelming majority of them privately owned. Only 55 centres received any public funding, from state and local governments. The question of Federal government funding had come to occupy a prominent position in political debate during the late 1960's. Two decades of rapid economic growth and industrial expansion, accompanied by full employment and a broad tax base, had created both an increased demand for women's employment and favourable conditions for an increase in the social wage. In some respects, these circumstances produced an apparent coalition of interests between employers, politicians and feminists arguing for a more equal share of public resources for women ('apparent' coalition because the other aspect of the feminist demand for child care - the transformation of social relations - was clearly never a part of the business and government agenda).

These social and economic conditions also facilitated the election, at the end of 1972, of the first Australian Labor government since the 1940's. Generally favouring moderately reformist social democratic policies, the Labor government's policies on services for young children were both ambiguous and ambivalent in their aims. There was confusion between policies which were largely concerned with using compensatory pre-school education as a means of achieving a

redistribution of resources between social classes, and policies which promoted access to child-care facilities as a pre-condition for the redistribution of resources towards women. In spite of continuing confusion regarding the objects of the children's services programme during the short period of the Labor administration (1972-1975), funding increased from $5m. in 1972/73 to $64m in 1975/76.

The years since the mid 70's have seen the development of a changed economic and political climate, and successive restructurings of social policy under first a conservative (1975-1983) and more recently a Labor government (1983-1990). In the child care area, this has led to a number of paradoxes. In many respects there is far greater continuity between the policies of the present Labor administration and its conservative predecessor than between the Labor administrations of the early 1970's and 1980's - there has been a profound shift in the political agenda irrespective of the specific incumbents. Since the mid - 1970's the emphasis in public policy formulation has been on reducing government expenditure and shifting it away from social wage areas to thos areas which are supportive, either directly or indirectly, of privately owned resources or which are devoted to coping with the consequences of historically high levels of unemployment. Services which in the early 1970's were regarded as a community responsibility have been progressively redefined as the responsibility of individual families, and reductions in social wage expenditure have been accompanied by the gradual implementation of 'user pays' principles across a broad range of services. In the child care area, the Labor government in power since 1983 has actually been much more successful than its conservative

predecessor in implementing these policy changes. Although the conservatives, in policy reviews in 1979 and 1981, expressed an intention to implement full cost recovery on child care services for all except very low income users, and to redirect some funding from the public to the privately-owned sector, it has only been under the present administration that steps have been taken in these directions.

The Federal government has announced that from the beginning of 1991 fee relief will be available for low income users of privately owned child care centres. Child care funding has been targetted more specifically at low income users (via income-tested fee relief systems which are now administered by the Deparment of Social Security). Ministers in the Labor government have placed considerable emphasis on targetting of expenditure as evidence of the "efficiency" and "streamlining" nowadays accepted unquestioningly as the indicators of good social policy. The weakness of this approach is illustrated in a 1988 report by the Washington-based Urban Institute, which compared child poverty in the United States and seven other industrialised Western countries, including Australia. The United States and Australia, the two countries distinguished by their dependence on means-tested and targetted programmes, also exhibited the highest rates of child poverty.[4]

In the past two years the Australian government has earmarked a part of the child care budget for what it calls an 'industry initiative' - encouraging employers to create work-based child care places which will receive some Federal funding. As well, employers who 'purchase' places for their employees in existing child care centres are exempted from the fringe benefits tax (an interesting

comparison with the Thatcher government's policy of taxing employees for employer-provided child care).

To counteract a thus-far rather gloomy (certainly critical) account of contemporary Australian child care policy, I should emphasise that child care issues have moved from the periphery to the mainstream of the political agenda in recent years, and that there has been a quite massive expansion of public expenditure on child care provision since 1972. Also, I believe, the major features of the child care policy have, overall, compared favourably with countries such as Britain, Canada and the United States. The movement of child care issues into the mainstream of Australian politics has not been due to the influence of feminists so much as to the very large rise in the employment of women with young children and the increasing significance of their contribution to household earnings in the context of falling real wages and massive increases in housing costs (largely generated by record high interest rates). However, the details of the policy, and the relatively progressive direction which it has taken, owe much to the continuous work of Australian feminists both inside and outside of the state bureaucracies over the past twenty years. A number of writers have recently argued[5] that this emphasis on working through the bureaucracy is a particularly Australian version of feminism. In the case of child care it has, I think, been important in putting in place a detailed and comprehensive set of policies on public provision, but this close embrace of the state has also had its costs, as I will suggest later in this paper.

In 1969 there were approximately 14,000 child care places (almost entirely in privately owned centres), providing for about 5%

of the pre-school aged children of employed parents in Australia. By 1989, there were 80,000 publicly funded and another 22,800 privately owned places, providing for around 40% of young children with employed parents. By most standards this amounts to a massive expansion, especially in the recent political and economic context. A further paradox is that most of the expansion has taken place since 1983, under the current Labor administration, rather than under the previous reform-oriented Labor government in more favourable political and economic conditions. In fact, in the first 2 years of the current government's term of office the number of publicly funded child care places increased by 60%, although expansion has been slower since then. This emphasis on expansion has been achieved at some cost, however.

Until 1985 subsidies to child care centres were related to the level of award wages for child care workers. However in that year the government announced that henceforth subsidies would be paid at a set rate per child - leaving management committees to face a choice between raising fees and reducing the level of trained staff employed. The cost of child care to users has continued to rise as a result of the cuts to funding, and the interests of parent-users and the (poorly paid) workers who care for their children are increasingly in direct conflict. The Labor government's argument has been that these changes are necessary in order to fund the expansion of child care places. But the burden of expansion is increasingly being borne by the current users of child care services and by the workers who staff them.

The political context in which child care policies are formulated has shifted away from a framework of social justice (especially relating to women's capacity to participate in public life) to an

increasingly labour market-oriented calculus of the economic benefits of child care expenditure. In 1988 a report by economists at the Australian National University suggested that Federal expenditure on child care resulted in a nett gain of $100m. to government revenue when costs were offset against increases in taxation revenue from women's employment and decreased social security payments. It was apparently this evidence which persuaded the Labor government to continue with its existing funding arrangements rather than to adopt a voucher system as proposed by the Minister for Finance and to leave the question of service provision to market forces.

It's often suggested that Australian feminists have been far more willing (and perhaps more able?) to use bureaucratic means to achieve their ends, and less troubled by a close engagement with the state, than either their British or North American counterparts. The history of Australian child care policy over the past twenty years provides some interesting insights into the consequences of this relationship. In terms of levels of provision, public management and control the gains have been considerable. But the strategic decision to engage with the social policy process, and the movement of child care from a radical feminist (and sometimes socialist) demand to a legitimate issue on the social policy agenda of the state, has changed the very agenda itself.

The Canadian writer, Susan Prentice, has expressed this dilemma succinctly:

> One significant outcome of this changing relationship between the [feminist] movement and the state has been that the movement has effectively "shaped" its demands in the familiar and non-challenging language of "service to families" and "women's right to work", and away from the politics of gender and class relations....

> ...The "mainstreaming" of daycare has had the result of moderating the demands and practice of the childcare movement. The trade-off for the policies which have been won as childcare has become institutionalised by the state, is an increasingly commodified daycare system and the abandonment by the childcare movement of the critical demand for transformed relations. While expended childcare services will improve many women's lives and make their paid labour more possible, it leaves gender relations within nuclear families unchanged, does not challenge the social definition of woman as mother, and does nothing to reorganise the seemingly unbridgeable chasm of "public" and "private" realms and responsibilities. 6

In many ways I think these dilemmas are now the major problems confronting Australian feminists with regard to child care - we've been so busy responding to the social policy agenda created by the magnitude of state involvement that we have at times lost sight of our own agenda.

## Notes

1. Australian Archives: Dept. of the Treasury, CRS A571. Correspondence files, 1901-1976. "War-time children's centres." 1942-1944. 43/550
2. Australian Archives: Dept. of Health, CRS A1928. Correspondence files, 1925-1949. "Child welfare establishment & control," 1941-1949. 155/19. Section 1.
3. See, e.g., Rob Watts (1988) The Origins of the Australian Welfare State. Sydney : Allen & Unwin.
4. Daycare Trust/NCCC Newsletter, Spring 1990, P.10
5. See, e.g., Marion Sawer (1990) Sisters in Suits. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
6. Prentice, S. (1989) The "mainstreaming" of daycare, Resources for feminist Research, 17, 3, 59-63.